



# **A more attractive and relevant vocational education and training: What matters?**

## **Introduction to a panel discussion**

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for the invitation to today's conference which is a very good opportunity to discuss both the achievements of the Copenhagen process until 2010 and concrete steps to implement our vision of vocational education and training to be achieved by 2020.

I believe that the main theme of this afternoon - related to the attractiveness and relevance of vocational education and training - is indeed central in our efforts to modernise VET systems in Europe. This topic is of strategic importance in the context of the Europe 2020 Strategy. Its flagship initiative "An agenda for new skills and jobs" specifically calls for improvement of the attractiveness of VET. VET should be able to provide the right mix of skills needed on the labour markets, reduce skills mismatches and so contribute to a better economic performance.

I would like to stress that we need to keep in mind our broader long-term vision of VET, but at the same time start to work immediately on concrete actions to improve the systems. From this perspective, I would like to highlight the new approach of the so called "short-term deliverables" launched by the Bruges Communiqué which makes the actions towards our objectives more concrete, visible and measurable.

When we look at the title of this session, what eventually matters is that people have a job and economies perform well with high employment rates and inclusive societies. But labour markets are increasingly dynamic with high turnover of jobs and people facing more frequent transitions between and within the labour market and training. Staying in one job or a company for a whole lifetime is not realistic anymore. Therefore, education and training policies should pursue the goal of empowering and equipping people with the right skills to master career changes in their lives.

More and better training is not an end in itself. We need to get young people to VET, as well as more adults in continuing training in order to avoid skills gaps and a lack of skilled workers in the coming years.

Let me give you an example. Let's think about a certain profession – for instance, a care worker.

In the context of an ageing population, everybody agrees that there will be more "white" jobs and clearly increasing demand for care workers in 5, 10, 20 or 50 years. So - we should be able to prepare for it and make sure we have a sufficient number of care workers in the years to come. But will it be easy? Will we succeed to attract enough young people or retrain adults to become care workers?

It might be actually quite difficult, although there will be clearly a great demand for these people. The profession might not appear as an attractive career option. Even if you have the best training methods, with state-of-the-art equipment and high quality trainers, you might fail to get people to this profession.

This is a very concrete example taken from a narrow perspective. But I think it is a good representation of the challenges we face in the overall VET sector. Just consider thousands of unfilled vacancies for traditional vocational professions such as plumbers or welders with rather competitive levels of wages, which we are unable to fill. These professions suffer from an old fashion image, even though also they have developed a lot and require more and more sophisticated technical skills and competences.

At the same time, when we speak about VET we too easily refer only the traditional vocational professions (like I just did) and not take into account the high end of VET. Just to give you an example the rapidly developing GEO SPATIAL industry - what most of us nowadays experience by using GPS to navigate in the traffic - are influencing the skills needs in many areas such as cartography, waste management, emergency services etc. VET is and must be part of all that. Other example of high end VET professions could be easily found in the area of creative industries.

Now, let's turn to the implications for both initial and continuing VET.

We need to do two things. Firstly, we need to make sure that we have a very high quality training which is relevant to the needs of labour markets. And secondly, we need to communicate it to the broad public in order to attract people to be trained for certain professions in order to avoid skills mismatches.

Well, if you think about the **relevance of training** as such, we are looking at how to make skills and competences acquired relevant to the needs of employers. The Bruges Communiqué adopted in December 2010 provides a very good synthesis of what needs to be done at both national and European level. I will not mention them all, but would like to highlight one important element. We don't need only very good professional and "hard skills", but VET must also be able to develop transversal competences crucial for people's adaptability, their sense of initiative and critical thinking.

Seeing the development of participation of adults in lifelong learning, there is a great challenge to update the skills of the adult population. Obviously, relevance means that training should provide an added value for adults. It should help them to progress in their careers, to keep their jobs longer, to increase their performance and satisfaction in their jobs. Basically it depends on a good analysis of learners needs and on quality of the offer.

Let me now try to develop some ideas about **attractiveness**. I start with a few examples which are important to highlight the value of vocational skills and vocational professions and can contribute to a better image of VET as such.

As mentioned in the Communiqué, Member States will encourage different forms of "tasting" VET and support cooperation with companies and sectors to get insights into vocational professions for young people. Skills competitions, including the upcoming WorldSkills in October in London, are a very good tool to demonstrate the excellence and level of sophistication of VET. There are also examples of countries organising promotion campaigns to improve the image of crafts and vocational trades to attract young people.

The promotion of VET has to be underpinned by its high quality, by its relevance as mentioned earlier, by the probability to easily find a job, but also very much by the attractiveness of jobs the training leads to.

The attractiveness of jobs as such might be a more difficult issue for VET policies. You can think about the quality, working conditions of these jobs, about salaries in sectors and the overall appreciation by society of jobs such as care worker, plumber or cook. These aspects are clearly a result of the broader socio-economic context, related to the structure of the economy, the competitiveness of vocational professions at a global level or traditions in societies.

What can we, policy makers and stakeholders, undertake in this regard?

I very much look forward to contributions from our speakers.

Thank you for your attention!